

A Death in the Family

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Summer has always been my family's favorite time of year. The trees full with leaves, lush green lawns, flowers in full bloom, and the school year coming to an end. This is an exciting time of year — a time for families to share special moments together, and a time for family vacations. Because our lives become so busy with work, school, and children's activities, we all want our vacation time to count. We put a lot of effort into planning a relaxing vacation, trying to make the most of our time together. I know that my family did.

Last year while vacationing with relatives in Boise, Idaho, we lost half of our family in a car accident. My husband Bill and son Nick awoke early one morning to go fishing. Bill and Nick loved to fish together and looked forward to catching salmon that day in one of the beautiful rivers of the nearby foothills. They rose that morning at 3:00 a.m., made the 3-hour drive

to the river, fished for several hours, ate lunch, and started the 3-hour return trip. They were driving back to meet us in Boise when Bill fell asleep at the wheel.

After several tours of duty, hundreds of combat hours flying an Air Force F-15 over Iraq, patrolling our nation's capitol on September 11th and for weeks thereafter, I could never have fathomed that Bill would lose his life, and the life of our son, in a single car accident having fallen asleep at the wheel.

I often wonder how this could have happened, and now I realize we lived a lifestyle that pushed us to the extreme. We weren't thrill seekers jumping off cliffs, or sky-diving, or driving fast vehicles, but we did what many of you do. We tried to fit too much into a day. We didn't want to waste a minute of time, especially vacation time, since it was our time together as a family.

This has been a very difficult year for us, but we have learned to count our blessings. After our ex-

perience last year, we hope to raise awareness by sharing with you the following regarding the dangers of driving while fatigued. It doesn't matter who you are, how strong, how smart, how fast — if you get fatigued you are exponentially raising your chances of being in a car accident. It's the holiday season and many of you will find yourselves trying to visit everyone during your limited vacation time. You will work till the last possible moment, make crazy driving plans to get to "Mom's" 16 hours away by driving all night so you can have one more day there. You figure you will take turns driving and rest when you are the passenger.

Consider the following research and studies:

- 62 percent of fatigue crashes or near crashes occurred when drivers had driven for less than 2 hours, often on everyday trips near home, where most driving is done.
- Nevertheless, long periods of driving are fatiguing in themselves, placing drivers at risk even if they were not tired when they started the trip.
- Taking breaks from driving tend to delay the development of fatigue effects on driving. The benefits of breaks are more pronounced early in a journey.
- Almost half of the drivers

who had a fatigue crash or near crash said they had not had a full night's sleep the night before.

To avoid driver fatigue on long trips, we urge you to:

- Plan long trips in advance so you know where to stop to take a break.
- Take a break at least every 2 hours.
- Plan to stay somewhere overnight if you are going on a long journey.
- Share the driving and make sure you rest

when you are not driving.

- Try not to drive during hours when you would normally be asleep (early mornings and late nights).

Watch and heed these warning signs when you are driving on long or short trips:

- You keep yawning
- Your reactions slow down
- You feel stiff or your eyes feel heavy
- You find you are day-dreaming
- You wander over the centerline or onto the edge of the road

At one time in his career, Bill served as a safety officer for his F-15 squadron and had briefed fellow pilots on the dangers of driving while fatigued. We knew these facts, but we never thought that it could happen to us. Our hope is that you will heed these warnings so you and your family will have a safe and happy holiday. Please take the time to get enough rest, not only on vacation, but everyday. By doing so you can prevent another death in our Air Force family. 